

## [River Stories]

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FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled Out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, NYC.

DATE Feb. 7, 1939

SUBJECT River and Creek Shore Stories

1. Date and time of interview (interviews collected over several months and worked into group sketch)
2. Place of interview Eastchester Bay — West Farms Creek.
3. Name and address of informant See separate stories on Eastchester Bay and West Farms Creek
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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THE WATERSLUMS

An occasional Board of Health inspector will drop around, take a gander at the place and go off.

In some places the Edison Electric will not wire and neither will the Bell Telephone Company, and the Consolidated will not run a gasline.

And this is not in the Tennessee Valley or the Everglades but in the City of New York.

It is on the shores of the City, in the shacks and the houseboats which form little communities, at Eastchester Bay in the Bronx and the Raunt on Jamaica Bay.

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If you take a Long Island train to Rockaway on a summer day, you 2 pass by a rude Venice with houses on stilts and dories tied to skimpy two-plank piers and people being neighborly across water alleys.

Or if you go up on the Third Avenue 'L' over the Harlem River you can see down below among the patches of green and the coal elevators and railroad sidings, some shacks; and on the local Lexington line the creeks which dribble westward from the East River into the Bronx like West Farms Creek and Westchester Creek harbor little groups of people in moored barges and in shacks.

Along West Farms Creek a man has cleared off the rubbish and made himself a garden behind a fence of old boards. Near 177th Street on West Farms Creek lives an old lady. She lives on a barge and she has pounded sod around the cabin on the deck and the grass grows there.

### WEST FARMS CREEK

The oldest resident of the Creek is browned to the color of a slow-baked potato and he lives on the Creek under the bridge at [Whitlock?] in what appears to be the deckhouse of a boat washed ashore, with a chimney pointing out of the roof.

When T. R's handpicked Rough Riders charged up San Juan Hill 3 the shores of the Creek were wooded and the water ran blue and sparkling to the East River. Then the City began to sprout around the Creek, the hills and vales and wildflowers disappeared and the red and gray brick rose up and cut the horizon to sharp edges.

The blue, the green, the fish, the white sailboats disappeared, and now it's gray and brown water, sooty shores, flat barges, derricks on the Creek, and the fishing boats which go up to Execution Light three times a week lie on the old Creek like a pink ribbon on a sow's ear.

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Every once in a while a body washes ashore, every once in a while somebody comes down below the bridge with a candid camera to take a candid picture, and up above the youngsters crossing the bridge, going home from the new high school utter shrill cries and don't look down.

The old man never says a word except about the weather. He takes care of the white fishing boats moored to the piers.

In answer to a question asked him once as to why he lived here he smiled and looked around him at the derricks on the shore and the barges and the gray Creek and he said, I just don' know why exactly except that I've been here forty-five years, so I guess I'll go on living here. I've been around boats for a long time and I don' know 4 anything else. My wife and sons are dead. I can't understand kids today with their automobiles and movies. Mister, will you tell me why kids are so tough today and disrespectful, do you know what the world's coming to? I don't know if I like living down here or not but I've lived here for forty-five years and I'm sixty-three now. I guess I can get along without electricity and a bathtub until I die if you want a drink of water dip the ladle in the pail over there.

There are other residents on the Creek and like the old man they are camouflaged and their dwelling places are camouflaged and the way you find them is by looking down there a long time among the barges along the shore until your eyes get sharpened and the jittery rythms of the street stop beating in your brain.

In this way you discover a war veteran who used to be a carpenter and now lives in a shack near Starlight Park. The shack is painted white and looks like the boxhouses you see at railroad crossings.

The war veteran's eyes can't hold to any one thing, his hair is iron-gray and his mouth is loose and funny as if it was on a hinge and he doesn't know how to hold it.

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He says the world is going to end in a flood. If I could get a 5 radio, he says, it would sure be nice. I'd listen to everything all day long but I'd keep it low. After a while I'd fall asleep. Then I'd put it on again, see? I'm alright and don't mention hospitals. I can't stand red-tape, see? I'm a'scared of something but I don't know what it is, see?

OR DONCHER SEE.

In the barge-home of the youngest resident of the Creek it's like being in a movie. Through the window the Creek flows cleaner than it does farther east, and it's like looking on a screen, a box-view of almost-green water with the leaves floating down to the East River.

The youngest fellow's voice is so high it threatens to crack through the roof, if this is a place to live I'm a Chinaman, I'm a college grad, I'm a mechanic, painter, utility man, I used to work for the Edison. If there's an odd job around I grab it. If a war'll bring prosperity I'm for a war. Listen, d'y'know what I'm going to do when I get a job? I'm going to move into an apartment, no, into a hotel. I want service. For the love of Jesus.

The colors of the Creek are yellow, brown and gray. There's nothin' nowhere [nohow?]. Nobody knows any tall stories or broad stories.

The City and the news came here via the milk train and when it rains on the Creek there is a pattering on the junked cars, bedsprings and old newspapers scattered along the shore.

The City kids come around with mongrel dogs and play games along the shores of West Farms Creek.

## THE BAYCHESTER COLONY ON EASTCHESTER BAY

You pass out of a clump of woods near Pelham Bay Park and the Baychester 'colony' lies very low, almost lost under an expanse of flat fields and the widespreading Long Island

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Sound. People finally are seen by the naked eye in much the same way that the eye finds live things when it looks for a long time down among the tall grasses—

Men who are weatherbeaten and quiet, a woman in gingham, a long-legged girl.

There are no signs up but it is written everywhere: beachcombers, odd job men, boat mechanics live here. In the summer it gets very hot and towards evening, in backwater inlets, little clouds of gnats and mosquitoes hover a foot over the water. Small boys living hereabouts grow up by the green high tide-marks on the pier-stilts, the whistle of the Boston-bound/ Sound Steamer on foggy afternoons, the winter snow decking 7 the swamp grass; and the tencent tip of the party that has hired papa's down-at-the-heels sailboat for the day.

In the summer the boathouse people are awake very early waiting for the dollar, one dollar and a half for a rowboat for the day and other prices in proportion.

Did you ever hear the one about weakfish, and were they weak. We went out for weakfish to Execution Light last week and there was a feller aboard didn't catch a fish all day. But about the time we were going back he pulled up a watch right through the eye which was nothing because the feller next to him quick as a flash pulls up another watch and what's more it had the right time on it.

There's a feller on a barge who has come down to the sea and he won't ever go back anymore. Look at you, you're wearing an overcoat and me I'm in shirtsleeves. I'm through with that kind of life. Would you believe it, the wife likes it too. And the kid, he's grown up here, it's home to him. I was a plumber but the depression knocked me dead. The bigshots in that union, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. THE GUYS GETTING FAT IN SWIVEL CHAIRS.

Did you ever hear the one about the discriminating fish, and did they discriminate, and I'm not superstitious either. I guess the fish 8 don't like my line. I once had two butterfish going

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around my hook I clocked them thirteen minutes by the clock. Now you and Jack and Jill can set your lines in the water on the other hand and I can take those lines and the fish'll bite. No, I'm not superstitious but that's the way it works, they don't bite at my lines.

Listen, said the plumber-sailor, are you going down there to the boathouse. TO THAT GUY. I want to tell you something confidentially about the people around here and especially about that old guy. I'm a progressive. DON'T SPILL THE BEANS. I know the world situation all around. YOU AND ME BOTH UNDERSTAND.

THAT GUY: he wears a turned down felt hat and his face under the hat is old and red with blue veins along his nose and little red streaks in his eyes.

The old man sits on the deck of his barge-boathouse, wearing a hearing apparatus on his chest and going to his left ear.

DOT GUY OVER DERE HE AIN' NOBODY AROUND HERE DON' TALK TO HIM. I'm just old man sixty t'ree years I don' remember so good excuse me battery don' work so goot—I sailed out England, New Zealand, Noo Yurrk. Come here inside I show you —this picture dat's Tilly Baker, t'ree mast bark out of Noo Yurrk. I'm a Finn I can't talk Finnish 9 language no more but I'm born dere. I only find one country better than Noo Yurrk dat's New Zealand. The laws in dat country are goot. Nobody gets rich a man gets 200,000 pounds he can't stay in business. Diz picture I can't get name it's too long ago — it's English vessel, no I can't remember name I work very hard. Yess, I work very hard. I vas peeling potatoes for cook ven I were eight year old. I sail only sailing vessels no steam. I have to get out to sea ven I were eight year old. I were two year old when fadder died so mudder got a pension but not enough. I get nervous when I think how I slaved in my young days I were next youngest child my fadder vass skipper excuse me I better not talk no more. EXCUSE ME I BETTER NOT TALK NO MORE. I'm old sailor-man I better live here. EXCUSE ME.

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Everywhere along the shores of New York it's like this or something like this.

All these places look cute from a train window. Cute is the word.

They are a population on the fringes of the City. Some have radios and electricity and most do not. There are fewer bathtubs.

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Nothing happens on the shores of New York and when you open this fringe population into talk the talk is as free as the wind but it's a cold wind.

You will find these people scattered on West Farms Creek and Westchester Creek and along the Harlem River or colonized at Baychester and the Raunt on Jamaica Bay.

The hurricane got them as well as the people of Cape Cod and along the Atlantic coast and they wonder why their part of it never got into the papers.